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From the Private Secretary

18 July 1996

Dear Martin,

CALL BY DR ALDERDICE, 18 JULY

Dr Alderdice called on the Prime Minister for 30 minutes in the House of Commons on 18 July. He was alone.

The Prime Minister said that it had been a very difficult couple of weeks for Northern Ireland. He might be an incorrigible optimist, but he thought the situation could be turned round. No one had come out of the recent events well, and there might be a consequent willingness to move forward in the talks. He was now determined to push the talks on from procedure to substance.

Dr Alderdice said that he agreed. Senator Mitchell had returned from the US in a more serious and impatient mood. He too was clearly determined to clear the procedural arguments out of the way. Meanwhile, there was a chance that Trimble was so chastened by his recent experience that he would be more cooperative.

Dr Alderdice continued that he nevertheless had serious concerns about the future, even if the immediate issues in the talks could be overcome. His main concern was the RUC. Twenty years of work to persuade the Catholic community to accept the RUC had been undone in a few minutes. The level of anger in the Catholic community, and among some in the Protestant community, was unprecedented. What had happened at Drumcree was widely seen as a repetition of 1974 and earlier events in Irish history. He personally accepted that the decision taken had been an operational decision taken by the Chief Constable. He knew from his own experience that the Chief Constable was not one to consult with others. He had even refused to give reports to the Police Authority at one stage. But the point was that he should not have been taking a decision with such huge political ramifications. He should have gone to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland or the Prime Minister and asked for help and guidance. As it was, he had lost the confidence of all sides. The

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only way out was to get rid of him, appoint Deputy Chief Constable Flanagan, and announce that henceforth the rule of law would be upheld come what may.

To illustrate the level of Catholic disillusion, he had no doubt that if there was an election today, Sinn Fein would defeat the SDLP. As it was, the Nationalist community were demanding a greater input from Dublin into Northern Ireland matters to ensure their protection. This was going to cause problems even if immediate issues in the talks could be resolved. His own personal trust in David Trimble had also been destroyed. He had worked hard on Trimble and, together with other parties, had gone through a lot to get the UUP into the talks and keep them there. Drumcree was a poor reward for this. If he felt that himself, it was not difficult to imagine what SDLP feelings were. He certainly could not go to the SDLP and ask them to trust Trimble.

The Prime Minister said that there was little point in going over this ground endlessly. The Chief Constable had been worried about the risk of deaths on Catholic estates, notably the Garvaghy Road. The Provisionals had played a large role in preventing the compromise which had been available. He acknowledged that the Catholic population was turning to Sinn Fein, but this was illogical when Sinn Fein had been part of the problem. As far as Trimble was concerned, he did not dissent from Dr Alderdice's analysis. The problem was that Trimble was insecure in his own Party. He hoped nevertheless that the fright he had received would make him move things forward. Meanwhile, he hoped that the Irish Government would not seek a greater role for themselves. This would only encourage the Unionists to take a harder line.

Alderdice said that he had been in touch with both sides in Portadown until shortly before the march, notably through the Police Liaison Committee. The Garvaghy Road residents had been willing to meet the Orange Order, but the Orange Order had not been willing to meet them. Going back to Trimble, he could accept that Trimble may have thought he was calming the situation. But in practice he was not. His antics on the frontline had been ridiculous and provocative. As far as the Irish Government was concerned, he did not think they would try to push their way any further into Northern Ireland affairs. Their attitude seemed to him to remain sensible. When he had suggested to them that it was difficult to keep Sinn Fein out of the talks when Trimble was still there, having violated the Mitchell principles, the Irish had not endorsed this argument. They had made clear instead that Sinn Fein could not be involved without a ceasefire.

Reverting to the Drumcree march, Alderdice repeated that the Chief Constable should have told the Government that he could not defend the rule of law, and asked the Government to take responsibility for this. It would have been better if he had decided to defend the position come what may, even if police lines had been broken and lives had been lost on the Garvaghy Estate.

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The Catholic population would then at least have said that the RUC had tried to defend them. The Prime Minister said that the Chief Constable's responsibility was to protect lives. What else could he have done?

Alderdice said that he should have known what he was taking on before he took his original decision. Everyone else in Northern Ireland had known that a major confrontation was coming, and that the Orange Order had been preparing for it for months. He should have stopped the Orangemen converging on Portadown in the way that they had and faced down the challenge. That was what had been done at the time of the Anglo/Irish Agreement. The Prime Minister said that the Anglo/Irish Agreement had been a different matter. It had been a question of sticking to an agreement signed between two sovereign governments. This was different from a local march.

Alderdice said that the issue was not the march. The Unionists had made clear a long time before that Drumcree was their Alamo. They believed that too many concessions had been made to nationalism and that it was time to take a stand. They had deliberately set up the confrontation. Everyone had known that. That was why the decision had never been a local operational one about a march. The Prime Minister commented that he at least had not heard this political analysis before the event.

Alderdice said that this was not just hindsight. He had told the Unionists in advance that they were making a big mistake. If they took on the security forces and lost, that would show the limits of their power. If they took on the security forces and won, that could only be a Pyrrhic victory at best. In any case, the fact that it had been a political confrontation from the start explained the extreme reaction from the Catholic community.

The Prime Minister asked what Alderdice would now do in his position. Alderdice said that the first task was to restore relations with the Irish Government and the Taoiseach in particular. Bruton was a sincere man, and not at all anti-British. The Prime Minister commented that his interview criticising the British Government had been a stupid mistake. He found it hard to excuse Bruton having gone behind his back in that way, following their conversation. Alderdice said that he believed Bruton had been largely motivated by a desire to preserve the position of the SDLP in the face of the huge anger of the Catholic population. He also felt betrayed because his own efforts to work with Trimble had been thrown back in his face.

The Prime Minister commented that it would have been better in that case to attack Trimble, not the British Government. He was of course prepared to work with the Irish Government and Bruton, but it would be difficult for the relationship to be quite the same. He had turned the other cheek many times to the Irish Government, but he did not appreciate being called a liar. We also

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had to remember that, if the Catholics felt betrayed, so did the Unionists. As Alderdice himself had said, they believed that too many concessions had been made to the nationalists. Both sides were difficult to deal with.

Alderdice continued that there were two immediate tasks. The first was to ensure that the Apprentice Boys March passed off without violent incident. The Governments would have to work together on this and plan very carefully. Second, the policing issue had to be addressed quickly. The Alliance Party would be putting forward a vote of no confidence in the Chief Constable to the Police Authority the following day. They thought the Chief Constable's replacement was the only way to restore order. The Prime Minister commented that if the Police Authority passed a vote of no confidence in the Chief Constable, the Government would have to support him. He did not see that this would serve any purpose. Alderdice said that he saw no option. He had never seen such anger and something had to be done to respond to this.

The Prime Minister concluded that he would try to rebuild bridges with the Irish and others, and to push the talks into real substance. If the procedural issues could be got out of the way quickly, the summer break would provide an opportunity for reflection, and work could begin again in earnest in September. Alderdice said that he agreed the situation could be retrieved. But it was important that the Prime Minister understood the depth of the problems now faced.

Comment

Alderdice was a little less apocalyptic and more cheerful than when I spoke to him on the telephone last Friday. His underlying mood remained gloomy. But the meeting was useful in giving him a chance to express his concerns directly to the Prime Minister. He seemed to feel better afterwards.

I am copying this to Jan Polley (Cabinet Office) and Veronica Sutherland (Dublin) by fax.

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JOHN HOLMES

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Northern Ireland Office

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